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THE LESSONS OF BEIRUT:
TESTIMONY BEFORE THE LONG COMMISSION

Brian Michael Jenkins

February 1984

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PREFACE

This Note presents the text of a briefing given on November 17, 1983, to members of the DoD Commission on the Beirut International Airport (BIA) Terrorist Act of October 23, 1983. The Commission was led by Admiral Robert L. J. Long, U.S. Navy (Ret.).

A summary of the report prepared by the Commission is included as an appendix to this Note.

SUMMARY

The attack on the Marine Headquarters in Beirut conforms to several trends in international terrorism: The volume of terrorist activity has increased in the last 15 years, terrorism has grown bloodier, and there is increasing use of terrorism by governments. We may be on the threshold of an era in which limited conventional war, classic guerrilla warfare, and international terrorism will coexist, with both governments and subnational entities employing them individually, interchangeably, sequentially, or simultaneously. As a result, the United States will be compelled to maintain capabilities for defending against and, with the exception of terrorism, waging all three modes of conflict.

Physical protection against terrorism poses a number of problems. Terrorist groups are hard to predict and hard to penetrate. Whereas they can attack anything, anywhere, anytime, governments cannot protect everything, everywhere, all the time. Physical protection is costly and can not only divert manpower from the primary mission, but can render those defended incapable of performing primary missions.

If more governments opt to use terrorism and the international community fails to impose effective sanctions, military force may become the only means of combatting terrorism. The kinds of military operations in which U.S. armed forces may become involved include preemptive, search and recovery, rescue, and retaliatory or punitive operations. Retaliatory operations include shows of force, selective targeting against a specific target, lateral attacks against terrorist targets in general, support of dissident elements, and full-scale military operations.

Security against terrorism must be a planning factor in any military operation. The collection and analysis of intelligence about terrorism can and should be improved to better anticipate terrorist attacks, accurately assign culpability, and develop appropriate countermeasures. There is a need to invent additional low-cost responses that keep terrorist attacks from forcing the United States to escalate militarily. Regular military forces may not be adequately

prepared to operate in terrorist environments, and they will have to learn to do this. It would be a mistake to consign the problems of terrorism to special forces only; the entire armed forces must be able to confront diverse modes of conflict, including terrorism.

THE LESSONS OF BEIRUT

The attack on the Marine Headquarters in Beirut conforms to several trends in international terrorism: It was an attack calculated to cause heavy casualties. It involved the use of a vehicle loaded with explosives. There is a high probability that the attack was instigated by a government.

The attack raises a number of difficult questions: How can the Marines in Lebanon or other American forces in similar situations be protected against further terrorist attacks? Who was responsible for the attack? And if we can identify who was ultimately responsible, what response, if any, is appropriate?

This paper briefly reviews some of the recent trends in terrorism and examines the implications of growing international terrorism for the U.S. military.

TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

Despite government success in combatting terrorists in various countries, the total volume of terrorist activity worldwide has increased during the last 15 years. The first three years of the 1980s showed an annual increase in international terrorism of approximately 25 percent--twice the rate of increase in the 1970s. Overall, international terrorist activity has increased fourfold since the 1972 Munich incident.

Terrorism also is growing bloodier. At the beginning of the 1970s, 80 percent of terrorist operations were directed against property; only 20 percent were directed against people. By the 1980s, approximately half of all attacks were directed against persons. Incidents with fatalities have increased by roughly 20 percent a year, and large-scale indiscriminate attacks have become more common.

These trends continued in 1983. The total volume of international terrorist activity for the first eight months of 1983 is about equal to that recorded during the same period of 1982. However, 1983 is much bloodier. Although the percentage of terrorist incidents with

fatalities thus far appears only slightly greater, the proportion of incidents with *multiple* fatalities is much greater. In 1983, more than one person was killed in 59 percent of those incidents with fatalities, whereas the average from 1980 to 1982 was 37 percent.

This trend is even more dramatic when we look at the growing number of terrorist incidents involving 10 or more fatalities. There have been 12 of these thus far in 1983, compared with a total of 11 during the previous three years. This trend is confirmed by still another statistic: The number of terrorist attacks directed against ordinary citizens, bystanders who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, has increased by 68 percent. As in past years, most of the fatalities are the result of bombings, which in 1983 became more indiscriminate.

Terrorists operate with a very limited tactical repertoire. Bombings alone account for roughly half of all terrorist incidents. Six basic tactics comprise 95 percent of the total: bombings, assassinations, armed assaults, kidnappings, barricade-and-hostage situations, and hijackings. No terrorist group uses all of them.

The terrorists' tactical repertoire has for the most part changed little over time. One growing tactic is the car bomb, or as we have seen in Lebanon, truck bombs. Car bombs have been used with devastating effect in recent months in Beirut, London, Paris, and Pretoria. Barricade-and-hostage situations have declined. Seizing hostages at embassies, consulates, and other government buildings was a popular terrorist tactic in the 1970s. But heavy security has made such takeovers more difficult, while no-concessions policies and increased willingness to use force to end hostage episodes decreased the probabilities of payoff and increased the risks to the terrorists. There were 20 such incidents in 1980, 10 in 1981, and 5 in 1982. Overall, however, terrorist attacks on diplomats and embassies did not decline. Assassinations and bombings simply replaced takeovers.

This suggests that security does work in reducing certain tactics, but not in reducing terrorism overall. Terrorists are nimble. If one set of targets is well-protected or one tactic becomes more dangerous, terrorists merely shift their sights or alter their tactics to obviate

the security measures. Protection against car bombs may reduce car-bomb incidents; terrorists will do something else instead.

While terrorists have demonstrated greater willingness to kill larger numbers of people, they have not for the most part shown themselves to be suicidal. The exceptions appear to be cultural: Shi'ite Moslem fanatics; earlier, members of the Japanese Red Army. It seems unlikely that suicidal attacks will gain widespread favor among the world's terrorist groups.

Terrorist attacks are directed almost exclusively against civilian targets. Fewer than 10 percent of the incidents in Rand's chronology of international terrorism were directed against the military or police.

American citizens and facilities are the most frequent targets in international terrorism, figuring in 29 percent of all incidents. About 30 percent of these have been directed against the U.S. military.

A NEW ERA OF CONFLICT

A growing number of governments themselves are using terrorist tactics, employing terrorist groups, or exploiting terrorist incidents as a mode of surrogate warfare. These governments see in terrorism a useful capability, a "weapons system," a cheap means of waging war. Terrorists fill a need. Modern conventional war is increasingly impractical. It is too destructive. It is too expensive. World and sometimes domestic opinion impose constraints. Terrorists offer a possible alternative to open armed conflict. For some nations unable to mount a conventional military challenge--for example, Libya versus the United States--terrorism is the only alternative, an "equalizer."

We may be on the threshold of an era of armed conflict in which limited conventional warfare, classic guerrilla warfare, and international terrorism will coexist, with both government and subnational entities employing them individually, interchangeably, sequentially, or simultaneously, as well as being required to combat them. In many respects, the future face of war is reflected in the course of armed conflict in Lebanon since the early 1970s. Warfare in that country has continued on all three levels--conventional war, guerrilla warfare, and terrorism. It involves regular armies, guerrillas, private militias, and terrorist gunmen, some of whom are

openly assisted or covertly sponsored by foreign states, by political or religious factions, and even by other terrorist groups.

Warfare in the future may be less destructive than that in the first half of the twentieth century, but also less coherent. Warfare will cease to be finite. The distinction between war and peace will dissolve. Nominal peace is likely to be filled with continuing confrontations and crises.

Armed conflict will not be confined by national frontiers. Local belligerents will mobilize foreign patrons. Terrorists will attack foreign targets both at home and abroad. The United States will be compelled to maintain capabilities for defending against and, with the exception of terrorism, waging all three modes of armed conflict.

THE PROBLEMS OF PHYSICAL PROTECTION

On the preventive side, the United States needs to devote more attention to the physical security of its personnel, facilities, and weapons, as well as to improve the reporting and analysis of information on terrorist threats and actions. Physical protection against terrorism, however, poses a number of problems.

First, terrorist groups are hard to predict, hard to penetrate. It is mainly a matter of human intelligence. There is a high noise level of threats, few of which materialize, few of which can be ignored. The U.S. Marines in Lebanon had received over a hundred bomb threats or warnings of possible terrorist bombings prior to the destruction of the Marine Headquarters.

Moreover, there is a basic asymmetry. Terrorists can attack anything, anywhere, anytime. Governments cannot protect everything, everywhere, all the time. It is a certainty that terrorists will attack the least defended target. It is a virtual certainty that there will always be a vulnerable target.

A continuing campaign against the American presence in Lebanon could include further attacks on Marine outposts in Beirut, American naval vessels off the coast of Lebanon, or American military or civilian targets elsewhere in the Mediterranean or Middle East.

Physical protection against every conceivable kind of terrorist attack would become enormously costly, in both manpower and money. The U.S. Department of State currently spends 15 percent of its budget on security. Over 2,000 man-years are devoted annually to the protection of U.S. diplomats abroad, at a cost of \$200 million. Allocations for security are determined not by the strength of the opponent but by the number of targets to be protected against even a comparatively weak adversary.

At a certain point, the requirements of physical protection can not only divert manpower from the primary mission, but can render those defended incapable of performing their primary mission. Embassies can be turned into fortresses, but with what effect on diplomacy? The Marine Headquarters and outposts in Beirut could be surrounded with concrete, cyclone fences, barbed wire, walls, tank traps, and culverts--all of which contribute to security. But would not such measures also impede the Marines in the performance of their mission?

This raises the issue of presence. Does presence require that the Marines man outposts, patrol lines, be seen with the Lebanese forces? Or is the mission of presence satisfied by merely being in Lebanon, albeit as medieval crusaders barricaded in castles? If presence means the former, then exposure to terrorist attack is unavoidable. If physical security is paramount, we end up with the latter.

That raises the separate, but related issue of mission. As we move away from traditional concepts of warfare, missions may lose definition. Blurry missions may be inescapably characteristic of contemporary conflict, although not in all cases. For example, Grenada was a conventional application of military power with a clearly defined objective and mission. The perceived requirement of propaganda abroad and domestic constraints such as the War Powers Act encourage vagueness when it comes to defining the mission. It is incumbent upon military leadership to seek from civilian leaders as clear a definition as circumstances permit. And it is incumbent upon political leaders to provide it. Without clearly defined missions, commanders face uncertainty in the deployment, operations, rules of engagement, and protection of American forces abroad. Political constraints imposed

by ourselves and by our allies may further complicate the commanders' task, limiting intelligence and lowering defenses.

POSSIBLE TYPES OF MILITARY RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

If more governments begin not only to support terrorist tactics but also to use them openly, and the international community fails to impose effective sanctions, military force may become the only means of combatting terrorism. Terrorist threats or actions conceivably could involve U.S. armed forces in several kinds of military operations.

Preemptive operations. Under extraordinary circumstances, U.S. armed forces could be called upon to conduct a preemptive operation. Credible intelligence that terrorists in some country, probably with government complicity, had acquired nuclear material or were clandestinely fabricating a nuclear device or other weapons of mass destruction might trigger a preemptive response. Fear that American citizens were in danger of being made hostages also could lead to a preemptive move, ranging from evacuation in a hostile environment to invasion.

Search and recovery operations. The successful theft of a nuclear weapon or nuclear material or the crash of a military aircraft carrying sensitive cargo in a hostile country where it might fall into the hands of terrorists could involve U.S. armed forces in search and recovery operations.

Rescue operations. Governments have increasingly responded with force to hostage situations and have developed specially trained units to carry out armed rescues. Armed rescues are last-resort, long-shot measures. The risk of failure is high, especially in attempts on foreign territory, and the danger for the hostages is great. That danger may be even greater now that terrorists have come to expect such attempts.

Armed rescue attempts would be appropriate when a local government could not carry out its international obligations because of domestic political strife; when a local government refused to carry out those obligations, allying itself with the terrorists; or when a local government invited foreign forces to carry out the assault. These

conditions rarely occur. Except in Iran, the United States probably could not have used force in episodes in which U.S. diplomats were held hostage.

Terrorists may have come to avoid seizing hostages in European and other countries where they feel vulnerable to assault, but they still might feel secure in certain Third World capitals. This suggests that rescue operations are more likely to take place in distant, probably hostile environments.

Only five governments have attempted armed rescues abroad: Israel at Entebbe, Germany at Mogadishu, Egypt at Larnaca, the United States in Iran, and Indonesia at Bangkok. The attempts at Entebbe, Mogadishu, and Bangkok succeeded. At Larnaca, Egyptian commandos ended up in a firefight with Cypriot forces. And the United States failed in Iran. It should also be noted that the Mogadishu and Bangkok rescues were carried out in a permissive environment; of the three attempts in non-permissive environments, only the first, the raid on Entebbe, succeeded.

Despite the risks of failure and the danger to hostages, armed rescues may become necessary when negotiations fail and terrorists seem ready to kill. If sieges grow longer because governments resist the demands of hostage-takers, pressures to make armed rescue attempts will increase.

Retaliatory or punitive operations. The United States has few opportunities to engage terrorists directly. Here again we confront an asymmetry--an asymmetry of vulnerability. Terrorist groups field no regular armies. They seldom hold territory. They have no populations to protect. They have no regular economy. In sum, they provide few lucrative targets for conventional military attack. We are compelled to take an indirect approach. For the most part, any retaliatory or punitive operations would be aimed at modifying the behavior of a government that had used terrorist tactics, employed or directly supported terrorist groups, or permitted terrorists to operate from its territory.

Retaliatory operations might be considered if the United States had incontrovertible evidence that agents in the employ of a government had carried out a terrorist attack, that a government had instigated a terrorist attack or permitted one to occur through willful negligence,

or that a government was able to bring the perpetrators to justice but refused to do so. Retaliatory or punitive operations also might be aimed at subnational groups in cases where national authority had broken down entirely.

Retaliatory operations might take several forms. We can rule out terrorist-type actions such as campaigns of assassination aimed at known or suspected leaders or members of terrorist groups. In addition to moral and political objections, these are not appropriate actions to be carried out by armed forces.

Retaliatory operations might include the following:

- *A show of force or a demonstration.* A show of force might range from the massing of military might, to supersonic low-altitude overflights designed to rattle windows and nerves, to demonstration bombings in close-by but unpopulated areas. A show of force constitutes a warning that further terrorist activity will bring real destruction.
- *Selective targeting.* A selective attack would constitute the next step up. A specific military target or support facility would be destroyed as a penalty and a deterrent to continued support of terrorist activity.
- *Lateral attacks.* These would include attacks on previously identified terrorist training camps or strongholds whether or not their activities were related to the specific terrorist attack that provoked the retaliation. In a lateral attack, one views international terrorism as a single adversary culpable in a general way for any specific terrorist attack. A lateral attack is, therefore, a counterblow to terrorism in general.
- *Support of dissidents.* Many of the countries actively supporting terrorists have armed dissidents within their own territory. In such cases, retaliatory operations might include providing various kinds of support--intelligence, financing, weapons--for domestic foes. One danger in this approach is that the dissidents may utilize American support to attack civilian targets, thus indirectly involving the United States in a terrorist campaign.

- *Full-scale military operations.* There may be extreme circumstances in which support for terrorism will constitute an act of war so heinous that major military operations are necessary. These may range from a naval blockade to invasion.

Israel and South Africa have regularly responded with military force to terrorist or guerrilla attacks. Both countries have employed the entire range of responses described. Their situations are similar in several other respects. Both countries face continuing guerrilla or terrorist campaigns. Both countries feel their survival is at stake. In both cases, terrorists and guerrillas find asylum and receive material from hostile neighbors on the two countries' borders. Neither Israel nor South Africa feels that it has much to lose with regard to world opinion. Their circumstances are quite different from that of the United States. The United States faces occasional terrorist attacks, mostly directed against American citizens abroad and carried out by diverse terrorist groups. National survival is not at stake. World opinion looms larger.

Few occasions warrant military response. As mentioned previously, Americans figure prominently among the targets of terrorists. A total of 847 incidents in the Rand chronology of international terrorism were directed against Americans, but few of these would have warranted a military response.

Between April and September 1970, Palestinian terrorists in Jordan, principally the PFLP, carried out a number of attacks against U.S. diplomatic, military, and civilian personnel. The Jordanian government was powerless to prevent the repeated attacks and at the time may not have been particularly zealous in tracking down the perpetrators. What the United States might have done to retaliate is not clear, but the ineffectual action of the Jordanian authorities coupled with the repetition of these assaults may have merited some action against the PFLP or the PLO hierarchy for failing to stop the attacks.

The multiple hijacking in September 1970 in which PFLP terrorists assembled over 300 hostages from several hijacked airliners the terrorists forced to land at Dawson Field in Jordan might have called

for a rescue attempt if the West European governments had not agreed to release prisoners as demanded by the hijackers. Indeed, the use of the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division in a rescue operation was discussed by officials in Washington. As it turned out, the hostages were all released and the incident provoked a civil war between King Hussein's forces and the Palestinians, leading ultimately to the expulsion of the latter from Jordan.

Rescue operations might have been contemplated in a few of the other early hijackings. But no embassy seizure involving American nationals, except for that in Teheran in November 1979, would have justified a U.S. rescue attempt. Local authorities in the countries where such incidents occurred were willing and equally qualified to deal with the episodes and probably would have resisted any violation of their sovereignty.

No other incidents have justified preemptive military operations, unless one considers the evacuation of endangered Americans from Grenada as a form of preemptive rescue operation.

In addition to the Palestinian terrorist campaign, several incidents conceivably might have justified some form of retaliatory response: the 1973 murder of the American diplomats held hostage in Khartoum by Black September terrorists known to be under PLO control; the 1973 Palestinian attack on a Pan American airliner at the Rome airport in which 32 people died; the 1974 bombing of a TWA airliner that resulted in 88 deaths; the 1976 assassination of the American ambassador in Lebanon; the attempted assassination of an American official in Paris in 1981 and the successful assassination of another in 1982, reportedly by terrorists operating on Libya's behalf; and the 1983 bombings of the American embassy and U.S. Marine Headquarters in Beirut, allegedly with Syrian or Iranian complicity. Retaliation certainly would have been considered if gunmen sent by Libya had actually attempted to assassinate President Reagan in 1981. Any sort of terrorist campaign in the United States traced to Libya, Syria, Cuba, North Korea, or any other foreign government also would invite U.S. retaliation.

The list of incidents in which a military response might have been appropriate is not a long one, perhaps a dozen incidents during a 15-year period--at the most, three or four rescues and a handful of

incidents that might have called for retaliation. These involved a few hostile countries in the Third World, primarily the Middle East, all known sponsors of terrorist activity.

On the basis of this quick review, it appears that there are few terrorist actions to which any sort of military response would be warranted. Those few are likely to have the following characteristics:

- They will probably involve a handful of hostile countries in the Third World. The United States is not likely to engage in preemptive, rescue, or retaliatory operations in the territory of Western allies or in the Soviet bloc. That means, however, that the United States is likely to have military superiority in any counterterrorist military operation.
- The evidence of state sponsorship, which must exist to justify retaliatory operations, will always be murky.

Domestic public support for retaliatory operations is likely to be ephemeral. An outraged public demands retribution, but if a military response results in further U.S. casualties, involves the United States in expanded military activities, or produces little effect, the public will oppose it. National survival is not at stake. There is little consensus in the United States on the use of military force or U.S. policy in the Third World.

A military response is not likely to deter future terrorist activity. Israel's frequent resort to reprisal attacks, for example, did not end the terrorist campaign against that country, although the 1982 invasion of Lebanon did disperse the PLO and reduce the number of terrorist attacks on Israel.

CONCLUSIONS

Security against terrorist attacks must be a factor in planning any military operation. Situations such as U.S. involvement in Lebanon and in Central America, the invasion of Grenada, and the deployment of missiles in Europe are all likely to provoke terrorist actions against Americans there or elsewhere.

Emphasizing a point made earlier, *missions need to be precisely defined.*

The collection and analysis of intelligence about terrorism can and should be improved in order to better anticipate terrorist attacks, accurately assign culpability for those attacks, and develop appropriate countermeasures and responses. It takes years to develop this kind of intelligence. Meanwhile, in situations like that in Lebanon, it may be useful to consider augmenting U.S. forces with area experts. They could be drawn from the military services, civilian government agencies, the reserves, or civilian institutions.

Military options in response to terrorism are few. Constraints are inevitable, and in some cases, U.S. interests are best served by not responding at all. Terrorist attacks cannot be permitted to determine U.S. foreign policy, directly or indirectly. We have to try to invent additional low-cost responses that keep terrorist attacks from forcing the United States to escalate militarily, which in some cases may be exactly what terrorists hope to achieve. These responses may involve special or conventional operations.

Regular military forces, as presently organized and trained, may not be adequately prepared to operate in terrorist environments. The armed forces will have to learn to do this, as they had to learn to operate in jungle environments. In the meantime, it may be useful to consider augmenting regular forces in high-risk areas with units whose training may make them better prepared to anticipate and deal with terrorist threats.

It would be a mistake, however, to consign the problems of terrorism exclusively to special forces. Even in a world of growing terrorism, specialized antiterrorist units with no other mission may be underemployed, and the remainder of the armed forces will be left without adequate preparation. The entire armed forces must be able to confront diverse modes of conflict, including terrorism.

Appendix

SUMMARY OF THE LONG COMMISSION REPORT ON THE BEIRUT BOMBING

While acknowledging the unique and difficult mission of the Marines in Lebanon, the Commission blamed the military chain of command for the disaster. Blame began with the Commander of U.S. Forces in Europe and terminated with the commanders of the Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) and the Battalion Landing Team (BLT). The Commission found differences in mission interpretation (at all levels of command) which contributed to the incident, but it also found that circumstances beyond the control of commanders influenced their judgments.

A reported shortcoming was the lack of specific and timely intelligence information. This led the Commission to recommend that the Secretary of Defense form an all-source fusion center for the collation of information found in similar crisis-like situations. Also, the Commission called for improved Human Intelligence (HUMINT) program only in Lebanon, but in other areas susceptible to future conflict development.

Preattack security was found to be neither commensurate with the threat level nor sufficient to preclude the disaster. The MAU and BLT commanders were faulted for the insufficient preattack security, and the Commission recommended that the Secretary of Defense take appropriate administrative or disciplinary action against them.

The Commission found little to criticize in casualty handling procedures. Some administrative/logistic procedural shortcomings were pointed out, but the heroic rescue actions of on-scene survivors received laudatory comment.

The report stated that the bombing was a terrorist act tantamount to an act of war which was carried out by a state-sponsored entity. Such terrorism is seen as an increasingly severe threat for which the U.S. military must be prepared. The Commission recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the development of doctrine, planning, organization, force structure, education, and training necessary for this defense.